

A Short History of Argentina

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Introduction: Geography and Peoples of Argentina

Argentina, the second-largest country in South America and the eighth-largest in the world, possesses a geography of immense diversity and strategic importance that has profoundly shaped its historical trajectory. With a land area of 2,780,400 km² [1, 2], the nation stretches from the Andes Mountains in the west to the South Atlantic Ocean in the east. Its terrain varies dramatically, from the arid highlands of the Puna and the snow-capped peaks of the Andes to the vast, windswept plateaus of Patagonia and the humid, fertile grasslands of the Pampa [1, 2]. The Pampa region, in particular, is noted for its extraordinarily rich topsoil, which transformed Argentina into a major agricultural power at the dawn of the 20th century [2]. This geographic endowment, combined with its strategic location relative to key sea lanes such as the Strait of Magellan, laid the groundwork for the country's economic and political development. Other key geographic regions include the Cuyo, an arid middle-western region

that is part of the Andes range, and the Argentine Mesopotamia, which is located between the Paraná and Uruguay Rivers and is comprised of floodplains and grassy hills ``.

The human geography of Argentina is characterized by a deliberate and transformative demographic shift that began in the mid-19th century. While the territory was originally home to a variety of indigenous peoples [3, 4], the modern Argentine population is overwhelmingly the product of a massive wave of European immigration. From the 1860s to the 1960s, over 6.6 million Europeans arrived in Argentina, making it the second-largest destination for European migrants after the United States . This demographic transformation was not accidental; it was a conscious policy by Argentina's governing elites who believed that immigrants from Europe would provide a "civilizing influence" and help the nation prosper . By 1914, approximately 30 percent of the population was foreign-born . The primary groups included Italians and Spaniards, with a significant number of Germans, French, British, and others . The influence of this migration is still evident today, with some estimates suggesting that up to two-thirds of the population have some Italian background [3]. British immigrants, while a smaller group, had a strong impact on sports like football and rugby and invested heavily in developing the country's infrastructure ``.

This historical narrative, encapsulated in the popular saying that "Argentines descend from ships," has created a complex and sometimes contradictory national identity [4]. While census data shows that the vast majority of Argentines identify with European ancestry [3], genetic studies reveal a more nuanced picture. A 2021 study, for example, found that the genetic contribution to the population is approximately 77.8 percent European, 18.0 percent Amerindian, and 4.2 percent Sub-Saharan African . The disparity between self-reported identification and genetic reality indicates a historical process where the national mythos of European descent was prioritized, leading to the cultural downplaying of indigenous and African heritage. This is further supported by the fact that significant indigenous populations, such as the Quechua and Diaguita, largely survived in the country's Northwest, a region where European immigration was limited . The following table illustrates the complexity of Argentina's ethnic composition.

Population Ancestry	Self-Identified (2022 Census) [4]	Genetic Contribution [4]
European	Undifferentiated (96.5% includes mixed, white, and East Asian) [3]	77.8%
Amerindian	2.83% of population self-identifies as indigenous or first-generation	18.0%

	descendants [4]	
African	0.70% self-identified as black [3]	4.2%

Chapter 1: Pre-Columbian Societies and Early Contacts

Before the arrival of Europeans, the territory that is now Argentina was populated by numerous distinct indigenous communities with unique languages, cultures, and societal structures [4]. Archaeological evidence suggests human occupation dating back as far as 11,000 BC at sites like Piedra Museo in Santa Cruz Province . While many were nomadic tribes, two main agricultural civilizations had established themselves: the Diaguita in the Andes foothills of the northwest and the Guaraní in the east and south . The Diaguita people, particularly their subgroup the Calchaquí, were known for being warlike, building stone fortifications, and becoming effective cavalrymen in their resistance against Spanish incursions . They were also skilled in agriculture on terraced fields, weaving textiles from llama wool, and had a complex ceramic industry . The Guaraní, meanwhile, lived in communal houses for 10 to 15 families and practiced a form of animistic pantheism, with an estimated population of 400,000 at the time of European contact . Both groups were adept at cultivating maize and had developed permanent settlements. The Diaguita people are particularly remembered for their fierce independence and successful resistance against the Inca Empire, preventing the powerful Andean civilization from expanding its territory into Argentina from present-day Bolivia . Other notable indigenous groups included the nomadic Querandí around what would become Buenos Aires, who were hunters and gatherers using bolas and nets, and the Tehuelche in Patagonia ``.

The Spanish first arrived in the early 16th century, and their initial encounters were marked by violent and determined indigenous resistance. Unlike the rapid conquest of the centralized Aztec and Inca empires, the Spanish in Argentina faced a prolonged, fragmented struggle against diverse and often mobile groups [5]. The first Spaniard known to have set foot in the area was the explorer Juan Díaz de Solís in 1516, but he was killed by indigenous tribespeople, and his expedition was abandoned ``. This pattern of resistance continued, as repeated attempts to establish a permanent coastal settlement were stymied by local inhabitants [5].

The first major colonization attempt was led by Pedro de Mendoza, a Spanish soldier and explorer who founded the first settlement of Buenos Aires in 1536 [6, 7]. Mendoza's

expedition, however, was ill-fated from the start. Plagued by his own failing health (he was suffering from syphilis), internal rivalries among his men, and sustained attacks from indigenous groups, the settlement was a failure. Faced with starvation and constant hostility, the settlement was abandoned after only five years [7, 8]. The repeated failures to establish a foothold on the coast demonstrate the strength and determination of the native inhabitants [5]. This decentralized resistance fundamentally differentiated the Spanish experience in Argentina from their successful and swift campaigns against the great indigenous empires of Central and South America, setting the stage for a unique and protracted process of colonization.

Chapter 2: Spanish Conquest and Colonial Society

After the initial failures, the Spanish eventually succeeded in establishing their authority, though it was a slow and difficult process. Rather than starting from the Atlantic coast, permanent Spanish settlements in the Argentine interior were founded from upriver and overland routes. The city of Córdoba was founded in 1573, followed by Salta in 1582, as the Spanish expanded from their bases in the conquered Inca Empire [7, 9]. Buenos Aires itself was only securely re-established in 1580 by an expedition led by Juan de Garay, which sailed down the Paraná River from the established Spanish city of Asunción in Paraguay [7, 9].

For most of the colonial period, the Argentine territories were a peripheral "backwater region" of the vast Spanish Empire [7]. They were a part of the Viceroyalty of Peru, which was founded in 1542, with the centers of power and wealth located far away in Lima and Asunción. The colonial economy of what would become Argentina was heavily focused on cattle hides and other agricultural products. However, this trade was heavily taxed and regulated by the Spanish crown, which sparked widespread smuggling and illicit commerce with British merchants [7, 9]. The social structure of the colony was rigidly stratified by the *Casta System*, which classified individuals based on their racial ancestry to ensure European superiority. At the top were the *peninsulares* (Spaniards born in Europe) and below them were the *criollos* (Spaniards born in the Americas) who, despite their wealth, were denied the highest positions in government. This system placed indigenous peoples, enslaved Africans, and mixed-race populations at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

This dynamic was fundamentally altered in 1776, when King Charles III of Spain created the Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata. The new administrative region encompassed modern-day Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, and parts of Bolivia, with Buenos Aires as its capital. The creation of the viceroyalty was a strategic move by the Spanish Crown to decentralize authority to prevent any single viceroy from controlling vast territories and to create a military and economic hub to counter Portuguese and British expansionist ambitions. This decision had a transformative effect, elevating Buenos Aires from a remote port to a crucial center of

imperial power. However, by shifting the center of gravity from Lima to the Atlantic coast, the Crown inadvertently created a new, powerful elite with growing local interests that were not always aligned with the distant Spanish authorities. The city's access to the open Atlantic and its newfound political importance set the stage for its future growth and for the broader discontent that would eventually lead to a crisis of the colonial order. A notable cultural and economic force in the colonial period were the Jesuit missions, known as "reductions," which gathered indigenous people, primarily the Guaraní, into self-sufficient communities. These missions, often called "socialist theocracies" or an example of "benign colonialism," provided for the spiritual and material needs of the indigenous people, training them in various trades and crafts, including printing and music, while preserving some of their traditional practices. The missions also formed armed militias to defend against slave hunters from Portuguese Brazil and other Spanish colonists. The expulsion of the Jesuits in 1767 led to the decline of these missions, which in turn negatively affected the regional economy and resulted in many Guaraní emigrating to Buenos Aires [10].

Chapter 3: Crisis of the Colonial Order and the Path to Independence

The seeds of Argentine independence were sown not by a single event, but by a series of crises that exposed the vulnerabilities of Spanish colonial rule. A pivotal turning point was the British invasions of 1806 and 1807 [11]. In two unsuccessful attempts, British forces tried to seize the Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata as part of the Napoleonic Wars [11]. The British, seeking new markets after being cut off from Europe by Napoleon's Continental System, were also motivated by long-standing ambitions to establish a trading colony in the Río de la Plata estuary. With little assistance from Spain, local militias and the Spanish colonial army successfully repelled both attacks [11, 12]. The first invasion saw William Beresford's force occupy Buenos Aires for 46 days before being expelled by a local force led by Santiago de Liniers [11, 13]. A second, larger British force was also defeated, with half of their forces killed or wounded in street fighting in 1807.

This military triumph had profound and lasting political consequences. The successful defense by the Argentine-born Europeans, or *criollos*, fostered a new sense of self-confidence and demonstrated that they were capable of governing and defending themselves without the aid of a distant Spain [7, 11]. The local political council (*cabildo*) of Buenos Aires took the unprecedented step of deposing the viceroy, Rafael de Sobremonte, and replacing him with a local hero, Santiago de Liniers, an act that fundamentally undermined the authority of the Spanish crown [11, 13]. The invasions were a practical lesson in self-governance and a powerful ideological wake-up call, cementing the idea that the city's

destiny was in its own hands.

This newfound self-determination was reinforced by events in Europe. In 1808, Napoleon Bonaparte's intervention in Spain overthrew King Ferdinand VII, plunging the Spanish Empire into a civil war. Under ancient Spanish legal principles, the American colonies were entitled to govern themselves until a lawful king could be restored. On May 25, 1810, taking advantage of this legal pretext, Buenos Aires established an autonomous government in the name of Ferdinand [12]. This event, known as the May Revolution, marked the beginning of the independence movement. When Ferdinand VII was restored to the Spanish throne in 1814 and showed no signs of reform, a congress of delegates from the region's provinces met in San Miguel de Tucumán. On July 9, 1816, they proclaimed formal independence from Spain, naming the new country the United Provinces of the Río de la Plata [7, 12]. While the new nation had won its independence, it faced years of hard fighting against Spanish loyalists in northern Argentina, who remained a threat from their base in Peru until their final defeat by the armies of José de San Martín and Simón Bolívar [7, 12]. In the process of securing its freedom, the fledgling government lost control of outlying territories that had been part of the former viceroyalty, with Paraguay declaring its independence in 1814, Bolivia in 1825, and Uruguay in 1828 [12].

Chapter 4: Civil Wars and State-Building in the 19th Century

The period following Argentina's declaration of independence was not one of peace, but a long and violent process of state-building that lasted for decades [14]. The new government proved unstable, dissolving into a series of civil conflicts from 1814 to 1880. The central conflict was a deep schism between two factions: the centralist "Unitarians," who advocated for a strong, centralized government based in Buenos Aires, and the provincial "Federalists," who championed regional autonomy and local rights. This struggle was not merely ideological; it was fundamentally an economic battle over control of the Port of Buenos Aires, which held a monopoly on international commerce and its lucrative customs revenue. The Unitarians sought to establish freer domestic and foreign trade, while the Federalists, a broad-based group of ranchers and local merchants, saw free trade as a threat to their economic interests [15]. This era was marked by the rise of charismatic regional strongmen known as *caudillos* [14].

The most dominant figure of this period was Juan Manuel de Rosas, a wealthy rancher and Federalist who served as governor of Buenos Aires from 1829–1832 and again from 1835–1852. Granted "extraordinary powers" by the Buenos Aires legislature, Rosas ruled the Argentine Confederation with an iron fist, brutally suppressing all opposition in the name of restoring

order and stability` [16]`. He staunchly resisted the creation of a national constitution, insisting that the country was not yet ready for such an organization` [16]`. His long dictatorship ended in 1852 when a joint army of former Federalist allies and Brazilian troops defeated him at the Battle of Caseros, forcing him into exile in England.

The period of state-building also saw a violent campaign to expand Argentina's territory. The "Conquest of the Desert" (*Conquista del desierto*), a military campaign led by General Julio Argentino Roca in the 1870s and 1880s, aimed to establish Argentine dominance over the lands of Patagonia, which were inhabited by indigenous peoples. The campaign resulted in the killing of more than 1,000 Mapuches and the displacement of over 15,000 more, many of whom were enslaved. The newly acquired land was then developed for agriculture by European settlers, which played a crucial role in Argentina's rise as a major agricultural exporter in the early 20th century`.

Rosas remains one of the most controversial and debated figures in Argentine history [16]. The legacy of his rule highlights a profound and persistent ideological divide in the nation. The "liberal interpretation," championed by figures like President Bartolomé Mitre, portrayed Rosas as a brutal tyrant and a cautionary tale of a throwback to Spanish colonialism [16, 17]. In contrast, later "Nationalist Revisionists" exalted him as a great national hero who defended Argentina's sovereignty against foreign powers and represented the authentic, provincial identity of the nation [16, 17]. The civil wars, therefore, were not just a series of military conflicts but a violent and protracted form of state-building, with Rosas's unstable stability acting as a temporary solution to the power vacuum. His defeat finally paved the way for the unification of the provinces under a constitution, but his polarizing legacy ensured that the debate over national identity, liberalism, and the role of Buenos Aires would continue to be a central theme of Argentine political life.

Chapter 5: Liberalism, Immigration, and Economic Expansion

Following the fall of Juan Manuel de Rosas and the signing of the 1853 Constitution, Argentina entered a period of unprecedented economic growth and societal transformation. Known as the "Belle Époque," this era, which lasted until the outbreak of World War I, saw the country achieve a level of prosperity that rivaled and, in some cases, surpassed that of European nations [18]. By 1913, Argentina's per capita GDP stood at 72 percent of the US level, and it was higher than that of France, Germany, and Italy [18]. The economy was driven by a liberal, export-led model focused on agriculture and livestock, primarily in the rich plains of the Pampa [19]. Argentina's real wages were also exceptionally high, rising from 76% of Britain's in

the 1870s to 96% by the early 20th century ``.

The government actively encouraged European immigration as a means to populate the vast and sparsely settled Argentine territory and to provide the labor needed for the burgeoning economy [20]. The elites of the time believed these immigrants would bring a "civilizing influence" that would enable Argentina to become a prosperous and free nation [20]. The results were dramatic. Over 6 million Europeans arrived between 1857 and 1930, making Argentina the second-largest immigrant-receiving country in the world after the United States ``. By 1895, foreigners outnumbered natives in the city of Buenos Aires, and the population of the country had more than doubled, from 1.7 million in 1869 to nearly 4 million [21]. The population would double again by 1914, reaching almost 8 million [21].

This massive influx of people fueled rapid infrastructure development. The railway system, which was only 10 km in 1854, grew to 4,300 km by 1885 . These railways were designed to transport livestock and wheat from the interior to the Port of Buenos Aires for export, a physical manifestation of the country's export-oriented economic model `[19]`. However, while immense wealth was generated, it remained concentrated in the hands of a landowning oligarchy. The influx of immigrants created a new, large, and politically unrepresented urban working class. Many of these newcomers lived in urban tenements called *conventillos*—subdivided elite homes or quickly built rental properties that could house hundreds of people . These living spaces were characterized by small rooms, limited access to electricity and plumbing, and a single entrance opening onto a central patio . The close quarters fostered a unique working-class social culture and political solidarity, leading to organized efforts for better living conditions, such as a major rent strike in 1907 . The social and economic tensions that arose, combined with the conservative elites' exclusionary political system, created the conditions for the emergence of new political forces like the Radical Civic Union and movements like anarchism [16].

The following table provides a breakdown of the scale and diversity of the immigration wave during this period:

Immigrant Group	Contribution to Total Immigration	Social and Economic Role
Italians	Nearly half of all immigrants [20]	Formed a majority of the population in some regions [3]; influential in language and customs [3]
Spaniards	Second most numerous, around a third of the total [20]	First white settlers [3]

Germans	Major group [21]	Established farms [5]; settled mainly in Córdoba and Santa Fe [3]
British	Significant minority [21]	Invested in developing infrastructure like railways [5]; strong impact on sports [3]
Others	French, Poles, Ukrainians, Arabs, Jews, Croats, etc. [3, 21]	Diversified cultural landscape; controlled specialized economic sectors like sheep rearing (Basque and Irish) [5]

Chapter 6: The Radical Era and Social Transformation

The social and political tensions simmering beneath the surface of Argentina's economic boom erupted in the early 20th century, leading to a profound political transformation. The long-standing conservative elite, represented by the National Autonomist Party, had maintained power through a system of restricted and often fraudulent elections [9]. In response to this exclusionary system, the Radical Civic Union (UCR) was founded in 1890 ``. A major center-left party, the UCR championed liberal democratic values and universal male suffrage, drawing its main support from the burgeoning urban middle class [13, 17].

After a series of electoral reforms were enacted in 1912, the UCR finally began to participate in elections. In 1916, the party's leader, Hipólito Yrigoyen, became the first president elected by broad suffrage [13, 10]. His government implemented a variety of economic and social reforms designed to address the grievances of the middle class and workers [13]. Yrigoyen, known as "the father of the poor," presided over a rise in the standard of living for the working class and introduced progressive social policies like compulsory pensions and regulations on working hours ``. His presidency was a step towards a more representative government, a stark contrast to the elitist rule of the "Belle Époque."

However, this democratic experiment was short-lived. In 1930, Hipólito Yrigoyen was removed from office by a military coup led by General José Félix Uriburu . This was a pivotal moment in Argentine history, as it marked the first time the military had intervened to overthrow a democratically elected government . The coup dissolved Parliament and established a period

of repressive, fascist-leaning rule . The UCR was banned from elections, and the subsequent conservative governments, which ruled through electoral fraud and corruption, led to a period that became known as the "Infamous Decade" . This conservative restoration, a direct rejection of democratic inclusion, established a dangerous precedent of military intervention in politics that would haunt Argentina for the rest of the 20th century. The failure of these fraudulent governments to address the deep-seated social and economic grievances of the working class created a power vacuum and a climate of widespread discontent, setting the stage for a new and powerful political force to emerge.

Chapter 7: Crisis, Authoritarianism, and the Rise of Peronism

The political and social frustrations of the "Infamous Decade" culminated in another military coup on June 4, 1943, which overthrew the conservative government of Ramón Castillo [9]. This coup was a confused political event, but it was unique in that it was not aligned with the interests of the traditional landowning elite and was influenced by US pressure for Argentina to abandon its neutrality in World War II [9, 22]. The coup created a power vacuum that a young colonel named Juan Perón would brilliantly exploit [9]. Perón shrewdly took the relatively minor post of Secretary of Labor and Social Welfare, a position that no one else in the military junta considered important ``.

From this seemingly insignificant post, Perón began to forge a powerful and durable populist coalition. He used his position to address the long-ignored grievances of the working class, securing substantial wage increases and legal protections for workers ``. This pragmatic focus on social welfare earned him immense support from the urban working class, the *descamisados* or "shirtless ones" [23, 24]. His rising influence became a source of concern for rival military and business interests, leading to his arrest in October 1945 [23, 25]. However, this move backfired spectacularly when hundreds of thousands of workers mobilized and marched on Buenos Aires, demanding his release [23]. This popular uprising, an unprecedented display of working-class political power, forced his captors to free him.

Perón's candidacy in the 1946 presidential election was met with a diverse opposition alliance that included most of the traditional political parties [25]. In an effort to derail his campaign, the US Ambassador to Argentina, Spruille Braden, openly intervened, publishing a "Blue Book" that accused Perón of having fascist ties [25, 26, 19]. Perón, in a masterstroke of political communication, turned this into a powerful nationalist symbol, framing the election as a choice between "Perón or Braden" [25, 26]. This narrative galvanized popular support and cemented his image as a defender of Argentine sovereignty against American imperialism. On February 24, 1946, in one of the most open elections in the country's history, Perón won a

decisive victory with nearly 54 percent of the vote [23, 26]. His rise was not merely a military power grab; it was a direct political response to decades of social and economic exclusion. By granting the long-marginalized working class tangible benefits and a sense of dignity, he created a new social contract and a political movement, Peronism, that would fundamentally reshape the country's political landscape for decades to come.

Chapter 8: Perón's Argentina and Its Aftermath

Juan Perón's first presidency, from 1946 to 1952, was a transformative period in Argentina's history, centered on his stated goals of "social justice and economic independence" [25, 26]. His administration initiated a process of industrialization and expanded social rights for workers, children, and women [25, 3]. Key domestic policies included the nationalization of the Central Bank, railways, and other utilities, as well as the implementation of free public university tuition and large-scale public works [24, 25]. A central figure in this era was Perón's wife, Eva Duarte, or "Evita," who became a powerful, though unofficial, political leader and a revered figure among the working class [24]. She was instrumental in the passage of the women's suffrage law in 1947 and founded the Eva Perón Foundation, which established hundreds of schools, clinics, and social facilities [25, 27]. Her strong connection to the poor, or *descamisados*, gave Perón's promises credibility and attracted a new wave of loyal supporters [24, 25].

Perón's second term, from 1952 to 1955, proved to be more troubled. The death of Eva in 1952 was a major blow, as it removed a key source of popular support and a crucial political ally [25]. As the economy faltered, Perón's government became increasingly authoritarian [9]. He suppressed freedom of the press and imprisoned political opponents. His relationship with the powerful Catholic Church, which had traditionally held a monopoly on social services, soured due to his government's charity work and attempts to introduce religious tolerance [25]. This growing opposition and political polarization culminated in a failed military coup in June 1955, in which naval and air force elements bombed the Plaza de Mayo, killing over 300 civilians. A few months later, in September 1955, another coup successfully deposed Perón, forcing him into a long exile.

The military's successful overthrow of Perón demonstrated the depth of the anti-Peronist sentiment among the upper and middle classes. However, by banning Peronism and failing to create a viable political alternative, the military unwittingly ensured that the movement would remain a powerful, underground force for decades. This polarization of the political landscape, in which one of the country's most significant political forces was outlawed, set the stage for years of political instability. The military, unable to build a legitimate government and unwilling to allow Peronism to return, was forced to repeatedly intervene in politics, creating a cycle of coups and provisional governments that would last until the 1980s.

[9]. Perón's legacy, therefore, is not simply one of social reform but also one of profound political polarization and instability, with his movement remaining a dominant and defining force in Argentine politics to this day.

Chapter 9: Dictatorship, Repression, and the Return to Democracy

Argentina's recurring pattern of political instability and military intervention reached its grim culmination with the National Reorganization Process (*el Proceso*), a military dictatorship that ruled the country from March 24, 1976, until December 10, 1983 [28]. This period is widely regarded as the bloodiest dictatorship in Argentine history . The junta, which came to power by overthrowing President Isabel Perón, suspended Congress, banned political parties, and launched a systematic campaign of state terrorism known as the "Dirty War" . The targets of this campaign were political opponents, particularly leftists and Peronists, and the methods employed were brutal and extensive, including torture, extrajudicial murders, and forced disappearances . Official investigations documented nearly 9,000 victims of forced disappearance, though the true number is believed to be much higher, as the military destroyed many of its records . The regime was also infamous for stealing children born to pregnant women who had been kidnapped and held in secret prisons ``.

The junta's economic policies, led by Minister José Alfredo Martínez de Hoz, embraced a free-market and deregulatory approach . He eliminated price and exchange controls and liberalized both exports and imports . His policies, however, led to a fourfold increase in foreign debt and a significant widening of the gap between the upper and lower classes, with many small and medium-sized companies going bankrupt . By the early 1980s, the economy was in a state of deep recession, and public opposition to the regime's human rights abuses and economic mismanagement was growing `[28]` . A peaceful resistance movement known as the "Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo" emerged, consisting of mothers of the disappeared who protested in front of the presidential palace wearing white scarves .

Seeking to restore its legitimacy and distracted from the worsening domestic crisis, the military junta made a desperate gamble. In April 1982, it invaded the Falkland Islands, sparking a ten-week undeclared war with the United Kingdom . The war, which the junta was ill-prepared to fight, ended in a decisive Argentine defeat in June 1982 `[29]` . The military's loss in the Falklands War was the final, fatal blow to its authority and prestige. It exposed the incompetence of the regime and served as a catalyst for its rapid collapse `[28]` . In the aftermath of the defeat, a combination of mounting public pressure, a collapsing economy, and a loss of internal military support forced the junta to relinquish power `[28, 30]` . In October 1983, a general election was held, marking the return to constitutional rule after

nearly eight years of brutal dictatorship. The Peronist party was surprisingly defeated, and Raúl Alfonsín of the Radical Civic Union was elected president, ushering in a new era of democracy .

Chapter 10: Neoliberalism, Crisis, and the Turn to Progressive Governments

The return to democracy in 1983 brought hope for a new era of stability, but the country was burdened by the legacy of the military dictatorship, including a massive foreign debt and a legacy of hyperinflation [28]. After an initial period of struggle, a new course was set by President Carlos Menem, a Peronist who served from 1989 to 1999 [31]. Menem's administration implemented sweeping neoliberal economic reforms aligned with the "Washington Consensus" . Key policies included the mass privatization of state-owned companies such as YPF, Aerolíneas Argentinas, and the national telecommunications company, as well as deregulation and a significant decrease in public spending . The cornerstone of his program was the Convertibility Plan, which fixed the national currency at a 1:1 parity with the US dollar by law [31]. This plan initially succeeded in stabilizing the economy and curbing hyperinflation, but it created an economic straitjacket ``.

The reliance on foreign capital and the structural rigidities of the fixed exchange rate system created vulnerabilities that ultimately led to a devastating economic crisis in 2001 [32, 33]. The crisis was a culmination of several factors: persistent fiscal deficits due to poor tax collection and a lack of control over provincial spending; a loss of competitiveness as the US dollar appreciated and the Brazilian real devalued; and a series of adverse external shocks [33, 31]. The Convertibility Plan, which had been celebrated as a miracle cure for inflation, prevented the country from devaluing its currency to respond to these shocks, leading to a decline in production and a sharp rise in unemployment as national industries could not compete with cheap imports [31]. The economy slipped into a prolonged recession [34]. By May 2002, 40% of the workforce was either unemployed or underemployed ``.

The crisis reached its peak in December 2001, when a partial bank deposit freeze was imposed [33]. This triggered a wave of social and political unrest, a partial debt default, and the formal abandonment of the fixed exchange rate [33]. The crisis, which led to a 20 percent drop in output and sent the currency into a tailspin, exposed the social costs of the neoliberal model [34]. In the midst of the chaos, the country went through five different presidents in just two weeks as the government collapsed . This economic and political collapse led to a turn in policy direction. In the aftermath of the crisis, a new political era began with the election of Néstor Kirchner in 2003, followed by his wife, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, in 2007 `[35, 26]` . Both from the Justicialist (Peronist) Party, the Kirchners pursued more

progressive policies, focusing on social programs and state intervention to reverse the effects of the previous decade and address the social inequality that had deepened during the neoliberal era [35, 26]. Cristina Fernández de Kirchner was the country's first directly elected female president, and her government implemented popular social programs and legalized same-sex marriage in 2010. She served two terms and was later convicted of fraudulent administration in 2022, though she is currently appealing the verdict.

Conclusion: Argentina in the 21st Century

The history of Argentina is a tapestry woven from recurring and often contradictory themes that continue to shape its political and economic life in the 21st century. The nation's development has been a cyclical struggle between the centralizing forces of Buenos Aires and the demands for autonomy from the provinces, a conflict that began with the civil wars of the 19th century and is still evident in regional political dynamics today. This long-standing tension has been a primary obstacle to sustained national unity.

Another defining legacy is the profound impact of mass European immigration, which reshaped the country's demography and culture while simultaneously obscuring its indigenous and African roots. This process of Europeanization, a deliberate policy of the ruling elite, created a unique national identity that is at once cosmopolitan and in a complex relationship with its past. The enduring legacy of Peronism is perhaps the most powerful and polarizing force in modern Argentina. Born from the social and political vacuum of the "Infamous Decade," Juan Perón's movement fundamentally changed the relationship between the state and the working class. Despite his authoritarian tactics and his eventual overthrow, the movement he created proved too powerful to be dismantled, remaining a dominant and volatile force that continues to be central to Argentine politics.

Finally, the country's economic history is a testament to the risks of its export-oriented model and repeated fiscal mismanagement. The economic triumphs of the "Belle Époque" and the short-term stability of the Convertibility Plan were ultimately undermined by structural weaknesses and a vulnerability to external shocks, leading to cycles of boom and devastating bust. This pattern has created a deep-seated public distrust of economic and political institutions. The challenges of modern Argentina—from the ongoing debates about economic policy to the difficult memory of the "Dirty War" and the long shadow of the 2001 crisis—are not isolated events. They are the direct result of historical forces that have persisted for centuries, a complex interplay of geography, identity, political polarization, and economic fragility that continues to define the nation's journey in the 21st century.

This cycle of economic and political upheaval continues to this day. Following a period of progressive governments, the election of President Javier Milei in late 2023 marked a sharp

turn toward radical, free-market reforms . Brandishing a chainsaw as a symbol of his intent to drastically cut government spending, Milei promised to eliminate the fiscal deficit, reduce inflation, and liberalize the economy . His administration has made significant progress on these fronts, achieving the country's first budget surplus in 14 years by the end of 2024 and seeing annual inflation plummet from nearly 300% to a five-year low by July 2025 . Milei's government also lifted currency controls in April 2025, which led to an estimated \$2.5 billion in foreign investment and a drop in the poverty rate from 53% to 38% . However, the country still faces major challenges, including managing foreign exchange reserves and servicing an external debt of approximately \$9 billion due in 2025 `` . Milei's reforms, if successful, may reverse a century and a half of financial instability, but their long-term social and political impacts are yet to be seen.

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